

Reporter 'Directs' Home

BY WILLIAM CURRIE

It was his first day on the job, and the young nursing home administrator paced the floor in front of his desk.

He had a problem, and he knew it. He was utterly incompetent for the task of administering care to 31 helpless old people, many of them crippled and senile, who lived in the South Side nursing home.

Less than 72 hours earlier, he had walked into the converted mansion at 6522 S. Harvard Av., and asked for a job as a houseboy or orderly.

Those positions were all filled, the stranger was told, but the home did have a problem with the Health Department, which requires every nursing home to have an administrator. Would he be interested in running the place?

"Well, sure," the job applicant stammered. "I never really thought of being an administrator, I don't have that kind of experience."

A phone conversation with an absentee owner followed. Then, over lunch with him in an expensive Loop restaurant the next day, the applicant became an executive in Chicago's rapidly growing empire of warehouses for the dying.

"The Health Department says we have to have an administrator," the owner said. "I don't get there much myself. I don't like to go down there. It's a bad neighborhood."

"The plumbing, quite frankly, is horrible. Now don't let anyone in who cannot identify themselves. Sometimes reporters try to get into these places and find some scandal. Can you begin tomorrow?"

That was it. No background check. No minimum qualifica-

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Reporter Seeks Orderly Job, Hired to Run Nursing Home

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tions. Just walk in off the street and begin to direct the lives of 31 helpless individuals.

It was a frightening responsibility. I know, because I was that new administrator of the Howard Nursing Home.

"I don't know if the Health Department will bother a little place like ours," the part-owner, Melvin Ross, had told me in our first phone conversation.

Ross and his associates also own the Stewart Nursing Home, 6710 S. Stewart Av. Ross spends his days selling cameras in a Loop store.

Moment of Panic

My first day at work brought a moment of panic when a city public health nurse arrived for an inspection. I prepared myself for a thoro grilling, well aware that I knew nothing at all about health care and had not taken the required medical tests. When I told her that I planned to take the tests soon, she replied:

"That's okay. If people show good intentions, I give them time."

One of her concerns on that visit was Ross' earlier failure to hire an administrator. He had not been granted a 1971 permanent license because of the violation. Noting my presence, she marked the violation corrected and asked me to sign the inspection report.

"No Place Else"

For the next few hours, the inspector chatted and leisurely filled out her report. She pointed out reasons why the home can never hope to comply with state codes governing the nursing facilities. But she also

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concluded that the code could never be fully enforced because "the state has no place else to put these people."

"I'd hate to think of one of my loved ones laid out in such dreary places," she said.

I spent much of the two days studying patient records and talking with them, an act that aroused the suspicion of the head nurse, who had doubled as administrator. On the first day, she confronted me and accused me of being an investigator or a student working on a thesis.

She immediately called Ross and informed him of her suspicions: "I can tell by the way he goes thru those records."

I managed to talk my way thru the incident until Ross

discussed the matter with his associates the next day.

The next day, which was to be my last, I asked the head nurse about several hundred letters addressed to patients from Medicare. They were stuffed in several office drawers unopened.

"The doctor told me they don't mean a thing," she responded. "I usually throw them away."

Told to Leave

That night, Ross told me I would have to leave because of the apparent "personality conflict" with his head nurse. The next day, he called again to chastise me for being too nosy about patient records and suggested I avoid being so aggressive in my next job as an administrator.

When I mentioned one patient's case history to him, saying I thought it only natural that an administrator take af interest in the patients, he said:

"Who? I don't know him. I told you, I don't get there very often."

The patient had been there for two years.

Nursing Home Patient Killed

George Smith, 54, a resident of the Howard Convalescent Home, 6522 S. Harvard Av., was shot to death last night near the home as he was returning from a walk.

Detective Thomas Quinn of the Brighton Park homicide unit said Smith apparently was the victim of a robbery. He was shot in the face and chest in front of 6520 S. Harvard Av.

Police said his wallet was missing and his pockets were empty of money.

Quinn said Smith often took a stroll in the neighborhood before he returned to the home for the night, where he had been a resident for two years. The home was the subject of an investigation by THE TRIBUNE yesterday after the owner of the home hired a reporter off the street to serve as the administrator of the home.